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Vagrants and Vagabonds: Poverty and Mobility in the Early American Republic

Timothy A. Hacsí

University of Massachusetts, Boston, tim.hacsi@umb.edu

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Review

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O’Brassill-Kulfan, Kristin. *Vagrants and Vagabonds: Poverty and Mobility in the Early American Republic*. New York University Press, 2019
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Kristin O’Brassill-Kulfan’s *Vagrants and Vagabonds: Poverty and Mobility in the Early American Republic* examines the poor relief and criminal bureaucracies in Pennsylvania, New York, and neighboring Mid-Atlantic states that regularly judged, institutionalized, and transported people, often against their will, in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this era of urban growth and early industrialization, poverty was increasingly visible and seen as a fundamental danger. *Vagrants and Vagabonds* does an excellent job of describing and analyzing themes and approaches that were common throughout the region, and also traces the varied evolution of these approaches in different states.

O’Brassill-Kulfan, who teaches public history at Rutgers University, also brings to life the individuals who were being judged, institutionalized, and transported, as much as her sources will allow. *Vagrants and Vagabonds* is at its best when exploring the experiences of the individuals and families caught up in the government system for poor relief and removal. Her chief sources for doing so are examination interviews with people swept into the system as transients that were conducted by, and recorded by, government officials. O’Brassill-Kulfan recognizes “many of these stories were originally recorded by authority figures and mediated through several layers of power dynamics” (p. 158), but does an admirable job of telling the stories within as much context for each as she can provide. Placing the movement of individuals at the center of the story allows for a varied and complicated understanding of the lives of the poor.

After a somewhat dense introduction that places her work into ongoing scholarly debates, O’Brassill-Kulfan explores the nature of transiency and societal response from a

number of useful angles. Chapters on laws on vagrancy, on “the physical landscape of indigent transiency” (p. 37), and on removal, the often-forced transportation of the poor, set the stage and then gradually hone in on the people who were being arrested, interviewed, and then placed or moved based on decisions made by others. Chapter Four brings race to the forefront; the author argues on page 86, “fugitive slaves should be counted among the populations of homeless and vagrant Americans in the antebellum era,” and then proceeds to make the case, detailing at the same time the situation of former slaves who had been manumitted.

O’Brassill-Kulfan’s description of the interaction of different aspects of government is effective, particularly in showing how the duties of officials in different parts of the system connected, and often overlapped, and how the lives of individual transients and the government structures they encountered were both affected by major events in the broader society. Chapter Five pulls together strands that had appeared occasionally earlier in the book to show the impact of decisions at the local and individual level. Chapter Six looks at transients and government officials when a cholera epidemic hit many port cities, devastating some immigrant communities. From start to finish the book also nicely showcases the similarities and differences between the states within the Mid-Atlantic, and how some state policies changed markedly over time, often in response to increasing numbers of transients as well as to demographic changes within the transient population.

Vagrants and Vagabonds is deeply and carefully embedded in the literature on transiency in this era; while O’Brassill-Kulfan has a good deal to say that is relevant to the lives of the broader poor and working class, her narrower focus and often-insightful analysis sticks to the topic at hand, which is people on the move without any steady income, and the systems they at times were trapped by, and at times sought out for temporary aid. Her analysis is designed to be read by other scholars, and will be of considerable value to them. The book’s language conveying the specifics of her arguments might be a difficult read for most undergraduate History majors and casual readers. However, the basics of her argument and the many life stories she briefly describes, most powerfully in the middle and later chapters, would be very valuable for

any readers interested in the lives of people on the economic margins between 1800 and 1850.

Timothy A. Hacsi is Associate Professor and Chair of History at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He is the author of Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America and Children as Pawns: The Politics of Educational Reform, both from Harvard University Press. He is currently working (very slowly!) on the history of bilingual education and on the history of public universities, and can be reached at tim.hacsi@umb.edu.